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Over by Jane Draycott
Miriam Gamble, September 2009

The 'in-between space' has been trodden to exhaustion in contemporary poetry; it has also, though once entrepreneurial, descended into easy game. Having multiple identities, a foot in every camp, poets need not commit to anything; they need not even *say* anything (Brownlee's horses with their weight shifting from foot to foot have a lot to answer for). *Over*, the third collection from Jane Draycott, is an exploration of in-betweens; it is also, however, a breath of fresh air, in that it dares to assess limbo spaces rather than merely squatting in them.

Over aims at taking stock: it's a book of middle age, both public and personal. The opening poem, 'Sky Man', probes the gaps between expectation and reality in viewing the mirror image of the self ('Not you. You'), and aging is a recurrent theme; it is also one that Draycott finds perplexing, and in very particular ways. 'Sky Man' works by increments: the meaning or general shape is not apparent from a quick first read, after which one may go back and brood on the details. Rather, the poem proceeds by a continuous process of shifting – much like aging itself, which doesn't, after all, happen overnight. In this sense, however, 'Sky Man' is unusual: more often, the reader is confronted by a narrator beached in a static zone or 'no-place' (much like the 'Not you. You' of 'Sky Man'), but a no-place sandwiched between clearly defined

alternatives – 'where we have come' and 'Where we are going,' as 'Wayzgoose' has it:

Where we have come, summer applies
its even weight to tarmac, cornfields
and the silent lake where no ink lies.

Where we are going,, the goose has
in her eye and takes her onward flight,
nib-neck leading toward the season
of quiet work by candlelight.

The 'younger self' shimmers attractively in the margins, but so too does the fully aged self of the future – a perhaps less predictable choice of greener field. In 'Golf', the poem's speaker covets figures 'in the mirage' who are conceived as being 'adventurous', 'one step ahead', and longs for transportation into their milieu:

It felt as if
boundless and bare the morning might take us
and carry us elsewhere, somewhere ahead

which wasn't a carpet of dandelions
struck by the clock of the wind again and again
and no one to blame but yourself.

Whilst this is in part a paean to alternative lives – the roads not travelled – it isn't wholly explicable as such. Rather, Draycott is drawn to binary situations – a penchant indicated by her frequent deployment of the sonnet, and of poems fractured by a vertical crack, or gulf. Indeed, 'Golf' (a sonnet itself) morphs its own title into a 'gulf' by the end of the poem: here, that gulf lies between the current position and the desired one (which seems to be death, the being beyond time), but usually the

speakers of the poems inhabit the gulf itself, and can do little more than wait for an external rescue force. The contours of each part of the binary are visible from, but beyond the reach of, the present position.

There is something of the writerly (and of the mid-life) crisis about all this: of the need to reinvent the self and of the recognition that 'this middle stretch is bad for poets' (though in Draycott's case it certainly isn't producing bad poems). The collection, as well as sounding an elegiac note throughout (witness the translation of *Pearl*), abounds in images of cleaned slates, which are frequently employed in conjunction with a panoramic overview of the past. The title gestures in a number of directions, not least of which are the sense of things being done and dusted (or the urge to have them done and dusted) and the accompanying eagerness for instructions as to what comes next. 'Over', as well as signifying the end of one's own message, indicates, of course, the period in which one hangs on the line, waiting for a response to form itself and emerge from the crackle of static. As with Longley's *Gorse Fires* (also a collection peppered with clean sheets and new starts) it would be tempting, and tidy, to suggest that Draycott's main beef in this collection is with writing itself (and her own writing at that) – the difficult wrench from what is comfortable and characteristic into unknown territory, the pain of waiting for flyaway words to return to the roost.

Poems, however, are never divorceable from the wider context in which they have been written, and Draycott's remit stretches more ambitiously than all this would suggest. *Over* is concerned with writing, but it broadens that concern into a wider speculation both on how poems in English ought to proceed at the present time, and on England itself. As Longley's collection was, in fact, intimately tied to the socio-political atmosphere of Northern Ireland in the early 1990s (and with how poems might simultaneously figure and transcend that atmosphere), so Draycott probes the landscapes of contemporary England and of current English literature: the only problem is that what she finds there is, at best, static and, at worst, stagnating.

In 'The Funeral of Queen Victoria', one of two poems in *Over* which were commissioned as part of a BFI 'Essentially British' project, Draycott coins Victoria Station as 'the terminus where it all begins'; likewise, 'time/ like a great iron seed will be kept/ and stored in *memoriam*, bearing her name.' It may be stretching the mark to force it, but one interpretation of this statement (and it's supported by many poems in Draycott's previous collection, *The Night Tree*) would seem to be that, post the Victorian era, England has simply stopped, become a nation 'out of history' (and literary history). Draycott's way is not to hammer over the head with overt 'meaning'. However, a number of poems in *The Night Tree* dramatically inhabit prior periods of history, and, in particular, focus on the erstwhile journeying impetus of the English via river and shipping lane. They do not say so, but they are situated in what might, for want of a better word, be designated England's 'greatness' – the time of empire, of exploration and discovery, and also of the burgeoning literature born of these developments. Imaginative writing thrives on the social energies it perceives to be at work around it; in *The Night Tree* Draycott returns to a time in which these energies were rampant.

In *Over*, by contrast, the reader is more likely to encounter characters fleeing inland from the sea, 'the whole crew fighting to put/ the beach back into the thermos .../ the ocean back into the woods'; in 'The Hired Boat', the characters want 'a boat that would ferry them upstream/ away from the chaos of sea' rather than one which will launch them into it. Waterways are still, as in 'Eldorado', associated with the 'migrant gene', but it is now apparent that 'There is no gold' at the end of the pioneer's rainbow: the great age of exploration (creativity?) is 'over'. The boat in 'Eldorado' drifts in Coleridgean doldrums – 'Forty days in an open boat/ drifting in the gas-green wilderness' – reminiscent of both the desert temptation of Christ and the situation of Draycott's lyric 'I'. Both *The Night Tree* and *Over* are, however, still much concerned with the concept of utopian spaces and places – with the imaginative urge to transcend or metamorphose the conditions of the present – and at least part of what

Over is about is the attempt to find an alternative means of doing so to that offered by the now defunct blueprints of the past.

One possible answer lies in the aforementioned bid to wipe the slate clean – rather than bask inert in the shadow of the past, one should strive to be proactive, begin again (or ‘begin, begin, begin’ as the aptly titled ‘Alpha’ has it). A more positive model for Draycott than the terminus in ‘The Death of Queen Victoria’ is the Easter festival, which fuses in one clean sweep the death of the old with the birth of the new. In ‘Romeo’, a re-enactment of the crucifixion brings lovers together – grief over the loss of one life blossoms instantaneously into the commingling of others. And in ‘Pearl’, the long process of elegiac grieving finally results in new growth:

From goodness other goodness grows:
so beautiful a seed can’t fail
to fruit, or spices fail to flower
fed by such a spotless pearl.

‘November’ cites ‘success’ as being able to ‘pass/ unrecognised by even your closest friends’ – ‘When challenged by strangers pretend / to have forgotten everything’ – and in ‘The Hired Boat’ the characters go so far as to desire complete purgation, in the manner of the Biblical flood:

By morning they’d vanished, their boat in the shallows
no more than a leaf or the eye of a bird

which drank at the glittering throat of the flood
where it narrowed to only a single word.

Language, however, as Hemingway noted, will always have been in other people’s mouths before it has been in yours, and there are problems with the pre-Babel ethos of some of these poems – problems of which

Draycott is more than aware. In ‘November’, the character (another nomad in a no-place) can only ‘pretend/ to have forgotten’, and in fact mourns continually the ‘severance of contact/ with those you love most’ demanded by ‘life in the field.’ And in ‘The Hired Boat’, one of the names mooted for the desired vessel in which one might row ‘like a dream’ to the ‘throat of the flood’ – the unpolluted source – is *Narcissus*, naval-gazer, done to death by obsessive staring at his own perfection. This is a land, a literature, a self gone in on itself and consequently drawn to a halt; it recalls nothing so much as the slow stilling into silence of Mahon’s narrators, desperate to escape the stain of history.

In such a context, the imperfect ‘You. Not you’ binary of the reflection in ‘Sky Man’ seems, while it provides no definite answers, a preferable option – one split between building on what is known and the possibility of diversification. And indeed, Draycott’s main solution to the problems posed in *Over*, whether personal or bearing a wider relevance, seems to lie in this kind of hybrid incorporation of different elements – in the manner of *The Waste Land*, if on a quieter scale. The collection takes its title from a sequence of twenty-six poems based on the International Phonetic Alphabet: they range widely through space and time hosting numerous different voices and perspectives, and, although there is no clear pattern, there is a rough trajectory from stasis, through potential, to awakening (see ‘Whiskey’, where the frozen body is brought to sudden self-awareness). Draycott poses, in this sequence as in the book at large, as Eliot-esque time traveller, able to salvage from the past, and from the spatial present, workable pieces with which to move towards a functional future. In the poem ‘Technique’, she creates a pastiche response to the traditional realist’s solid advice on how to conjure up a thing on which one might then write: ‘Now move through/ the rest of the house as if you were a camera.’ But of course, one is not a camera, one is a consciousness made of and invaded on a daily basis by rogue information. Draycott’s kitchen (‘A house’, the learned gentlemen helpfully tell us, ‘is a good large object to

visualise') quickly and mischievously turns into 'a back street in a labyrinth/ of slums': definition yields to definition, possibility to narrative possibility, as various components of the poet's knowledge make competitive play. In 'Technique', Draycott rejects the clear, self-contained outline of the well-wrought urn (though the poem undoubtedly is one – she's nothing if not meticulous) in favour of the 'One hundred and one things' crowding noisily around the contemporary artist. She may yearn for a time when art 'knew nothing of trouble and its hellish/ landscape, its weight on the scales like some absurdly/ growing thing'; she is, however, more than equal to the challenges of working in one in which this isn't the case. *Over* offers the reader beautifully crafted poems which engage searchingly with their time and genre, and which bring 'news from another place' to their own 'dark age'. 'There's much more you could tell' says the speaker of 'X-ray', and this seems both challenge and promise.

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